

TESTIMONY OF

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**Concerning
Chronic Wasting Disease**

**Before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
and the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS
of the
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman. I am Russell George, Director of the Colorado Division of Wildlife. Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today to address the important topic of Chronic Wasting Disease, commonly referred to as CWD. As you know, the State of Colorado has been dealing with the challenges presented by this disease for more than 20 years. Despite our experience, research and control efforts, much about this disease remains unknown and today CWD commands more of our attention and resources than ever before.

The recent and unprecedented appearance of CWD in the western half of Colorado has forever changed our management approach. In situations where the disease appears poised to spread beyond its historic range in our state, as in the case of the West slope incident, we will aggressively attempt to eradicate it. Such an undertaking may require considerable money and manpower. In recognition of that fact, our Legislature, at the request of Governor Owens, recently approved a significant amendment to our budget. That amendment provides the Division of Wildlife with an

additional \$1.9 million in resources to combat this threat to our wild deer and elk.

I would like to emphasize that the appearance of CWD outside of its previous historic range in northeastern Colorado threatens more than just the elk and deer of our State. If allowed to persist unchecked, the disease has the potential to negatively impact rural economies that rely heavily upon tourism and hunting - activities that are directly dependent upon abundant and healthy wildlife. It is for these reasons that the Governor of Colorado requires an aggressive approach to controlling and eliminating CWD. Last month Governor Owens also appointed a special State task force of affected interests and experts to monitor our management progress and to recommend new actions to combat this threat. He has also joined with other Western Governors to exchange information and to facilitate a more coordinated regional management approach. Such sharing and coordinating of information will be a key to the successful management of CWD.

Chronic Wasting Disease was considered a western concern for quite some time because within the United States, CWD had been diagnosed only in farmed (captive) cervids in the states of Montana, South Dakota, Colorado, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Kansas. Furthermore, it had only been confirmed in wild (free-ranging) deer and/or elk in the states of Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska and South Dakota. The recent outbreak of this disease in the State of Wisconsin underscores the fact that CWD is a truly a national concern, no longer one "safely" confined to the West. It is now more important than ever that cooperation and communication occur at both the state and federal levels.

Please allow me to highlight some areas I consider ripe for state-federal cooperation or partnership.

Monitoring and Surveillance

Many state wildlife agencies will increase efforts this fall to monitor the distribution and prevalence of CWD in wild populations of cervids, especially states with elk or deer game farms. Relying solely upon testing of symptomatic or "clinical" free-ranging animals will no longer suffice in many cases. States must also be prepared to cull wild deer and elk in situations where hunter-supplied samples are inadequate or nonexistent. Considerable staff time and equipment are required for such an undertaking. If existing equipment such as vehicles, trailers and ATV's are used replacement equipment may be required because of concerns about allowing potentially contaminated items outside of areas where known CWD positive animals exist. In some situations, aircraft may be required to position staff, cull animals and remove carcasses from inaccessible areas. The use of federal employees, equipment and facilities could be helpful in many of these situations. Congress should give clear direction to appropriate agencies to help state efforts.

Testing

We are very concerned that state, regional and national testing labs will not be able to timely process the volume of samples anticipated this fall as a result of the discovery of CWD in Wisconsin and on the West slope of Colorado. In addition to the increased surveillance desired by

wildlife managers and the public, hunters will want assurances that their wild game is safe to eat. These demands will contribute significantly to laboratory workloads around the country. Meeting this demand will require existing labs to gear up or otherwise convert their operations. Expanded or new facilities are likely to be required as well. We have had some preliminary discussions with federal agencies for access to their lab facilities, but we need to be sure they can more quickly provide those resources. Additional lab facilities will be needed by September to meet hunter demands. The help of this committee and Congress will be crucial in helping us reach our goal.

Depopulation

Agricultural and wildlife agencies must be prepared to depopulate exposed or suspect captive herds. These agencies must also be able to destroy carcasses following testing. Thus far, carcasses have been chemically digested, incinerated or buried in landfills. Each approach requires additional funding and equipment not traditionally available. Federal help in sharing in those costs will be vital.

Proactive Approaches

In addition to managing CWD where it has been found, agencies need to consider aggressive means to limit the spread of the disease. Two efforts that will require additional funds are whole-herd buy-outs and double fencing of all existing captive-cervid facilities. We have undertaken both of these steps in Colorado, but we must be prepared to do more to prevent the spread of CWD to new areas.

Research and External Peer Review

An increase in research on TSEs in general and CWD in particular is needed. The management of CWD requires a thorough understanding of transmission, etiology, natural host range, and relationship to other TSEs, as well as the development of tools to diagnose, treat and prevent CWD. The federal government can facilitate collaboration and encourage wildlife-specific research by using such incentives as cost sharing or research grants to state wildlife, agriculture and public health agencies. Concerned publics will be more comfortable with management actions that are securely grounded in science. In some cases the science is not keeping pace with management demands. As a result, some segments of the public are questioning state agency strategies and plans. Federal government coordination of support for professional peer review of state and regional efforts will help address the public's concerns.

Communication and Education

Around the country, state agricultural, wildlife and public health agencies are working to independently develop communications strategies and capabilities. Public interest and concern regarding CWD is increasing exponentially. Popular literature, web pages and public presentations are in ever-greater demand. Again, agency staff and funding are severely strained as a result. Federal assistance to develop products to ensure timely and consistent information on this issue of

national concern will be important.

National Role in Developing Uniform State Standards for the Captive Cervid Industry

Individual states have begun to adopt or consider a variety of regulations governing the testing, monitoring, identification, movement and record-keeping of captive deer and elk. It is becoming increasingly more difficult for the captive cervid industry and for state regulatory agencies themselves to track and comply with these varied rules. Thus there is a great need for states to cooperate in establishing uniform, science-based regulations that will protect both wild and captive herds from CWD. Existing federal regulations that apply to captive cervids (e.g., U. S. Department of Agriculture's Interim Rules regarding CWD) should be reviewed to ensure that wild cervids are adequately protected and for consistency with these uniform state standards.

Before I conclude, I would like to make you aware of several activities the State of Colorado is engaged in regarding CWD. I have already mentioned the Governor's CWD Task Force. I would also like to note that the Colorado Division of Wildlife is co-hosting a national conference on CWD in Denver on August 6-7, 2002. In addition, we are participating in a multi-state effort to develop a more uniform and consistent state approach to managing CWD in wild deer and elk. We have also initiated external peer review of our management activities to date. I am proud to say that Dr. Mike Miller of our staff continues to conduct and collaborate on groundbreaking CWD research with others around the country.

In summary, I would like to emphasize that there are many opportunities for the federal government to assist States in CWD management and research. That assistance can be provided in such forms as expertise, personnel, equipment, facilities, regulations, policy and funding. For example, Colorado alone has identified a need for more than \$5 million in research, control and testing needs beyond what we have been able to provide at the state level. I would urge you to consider the most streamlined and efficient mechanisms for making such funding available including direct block grants to the states, grants that pass through no more than one federal agency, or simple cost-sharing.

This is also an appropriate time for me to state that I view state wildlife agencies as having the primary responsibility for managing wild cervids. State wildlife agencies have acted quickly in response to CWD outbreaks. While we do need additional tools, this should not cause a shift of primary jurisdiction over resident wildlife to federal agencies.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts and concerns regarding Chronic Wasting Disease with you and your distinguished colleagues. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.